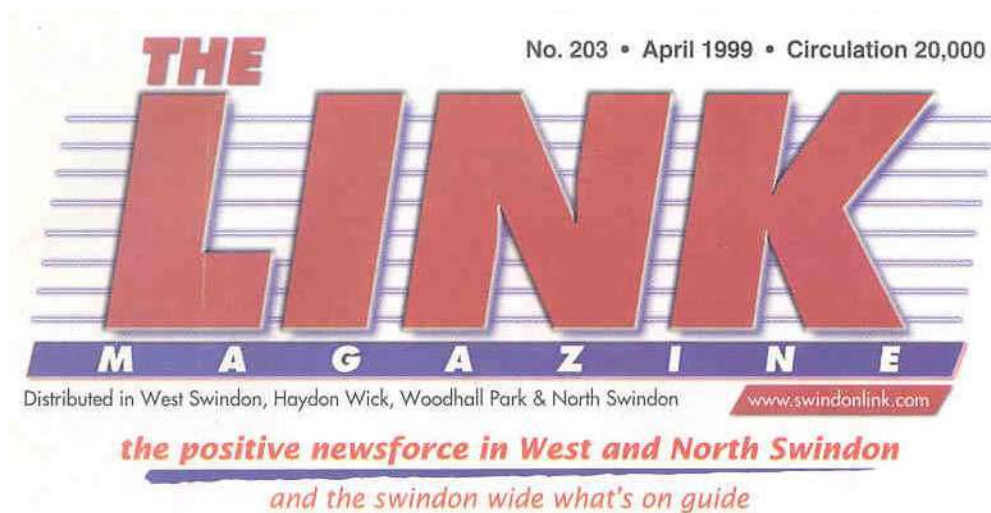


# GINA DENNIS

Examples of articles written for the Link Magazine,  
where I was staff writer between May 1998 and June 1999



## When Shaw was a country idyll

When, following their marriage in December 1955, Rose and Graham Tylee moved into the bungalow they had just built in Old Shaw Lane, they came to a hamlet surrounded by farmland.

At that time there was a shortage of housing for young married couples and many, having experienced gloomy rented rooms, ended up returning to their parents. Graham and Rose were determined to start their marriage in a proper home. So when, in 1953, the opportunity arose to buy a quarter acre plot from Mrs Maslin at Lower Shaw Farm, they jumped at the chance.

Easter 1953 was spent, in a bright burst of spring sunshine, with a crowbar, pick and shovel, digging out a stony bank to make a 'pull-in' required by the planners. For the following eighteen months, "freezing in the winter winds, browning in the sun," Graham and Rose, dug trenches, mixed cement, nailed cedar tiles to roof timbers and threw up 'giant worm-casts' whilst excavating for the septic tank. From skeleton rooms, carpeted with buttercups and clover, emerged a home.

The bungalow stood, just three miles from the town centre, on the main road from Swindon to Purton. Rose remembers watching the procession of bicycles heading to and from the GWR works. Closer to the gates, when the 'hooter' went, the bicycles became a torrent, filling the road.

Rose herself had started work at as a GWR 'Comptometer Girl' shortly after leaving grammar school. The mileage office was at the top of 72 stairs and the nearest toilets were three floors down. When, eventually, one was built on her floor, you had to ask the manager for the key to use it. As office junior, she was expected to collect the bosses' coats from the cloakroom for them. Career choices for girls were generally limited to teaching, nursing, shop or office work. In Swindon, GWR was a prime employer, "if you could get 'inside', everyone thought you were made for life."

*1953: Rose makes a start on the foundations of her new home*



'Cedar Tops', as Rose and Graham named their bungalow, became a family home with the birth of their son, Chris. Rose is glad that Chris grew up surrounded by the countryside. She remembers riverside walks punctuated by glimpses of kingfishers and herons. In their season, the fields were filled with cowslips and primroses, mushrooms and blackberries. Peatmoor Copse was known as 'the jungle', a source of adventure for small boys.

The hamlet grew and with more houses a village shop opened sell-



ing everything, but it specialised in birthday cakes. Meat, milk, bread and groceries were all delivered by various vans. Double-decker buses ran twice a day, though they often had room only for Rose and her son, but not the pushchair.

Rose says it was traumatic when they first heard that their country lane was to eventually be found in the middle of the biggest housing development in Europe and residents put up strong objections to Swindon's plans to expand westwards.

She was sad to lose the fields and cows at the back fence. But Old Shaw Lane was and is a settled community where people support each other. The road, no longer a main route, is still used more by walkers, cyclists and horses than by cars. For her, it retains the feel of a 'rural island' in the midst of West Swindon.

"I've enjoyed my life here, the countryside, my garden. It was a lot of hard work building the bungalow but I've never regretted it. I love my home and enjoy the people in the area."

With her strong connections to Swindon's railway past, plans for the STEAM heritage centre and the possible restoration of the New Mechanics Institute have delighted Rose. "We need to be able to look back on the history of the town - it anchors people to their roots."

*Looking across the beginnings of Cedar Tops to Lower Shaw Farm*



## Diabetes: a condition for life

With Diabetes Awareness Week approaching, Gina Dennis talked to Katie Stafford from Freshbrook who wants people to be aware of the permanent effects of diabetes.

Watching lively four year old Samuel Stafford in the playground at Oliver Tomkins School or enjoying his brightly coloured climbing frame in the garden, you would not guess that his life is dependent on regular injections of insulin and constant monitoring.

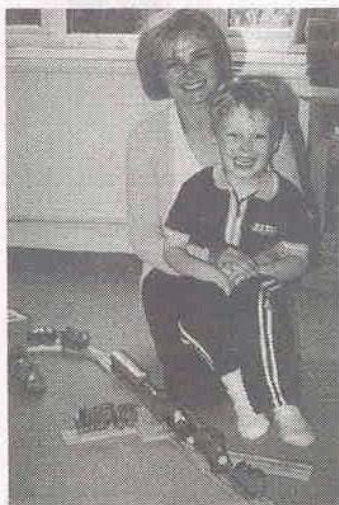
About a year ago, Samuel's mum, Katie, noticed that he was becoming anxious and tearful over the smallest incidents. If he stood on a toy or knocked his arm, he would cry inconsolably. He was also hungry and thirsty all the time.

Their GP diagnosed diabetes and Samuel was admitted to hospital immediately. The next 24 hours were a traumatic blur of blood tests and injections as Samuel's condition was brought under control.

At home a nurse came every day to give him his injections and support and train Katie and husband Michael. At first, it took two of them to hold Samuel down. It took months for him to come to terms with the needles and even now, like any four-year-old, he still doesn't enjoy the experience.

"If it were just the injections and blood tests, it would be fine," said Katie. "The hardest part is not knowing what's ahead."

As well as the risk of hypoglycaemic attacks and coma, diabetics can face problems with their eyes, kidneys, heart and circulatory system and nerve damage. To protect against such long-term harm, it is vital to achieve a near normal glucose level and maintain a healthy lifestyle



Samuel needs six regular meals a day that are high in carbohydrates and low in fat and sugar. He can have small quantities of sweet things like ice cream, but only after a balanced meal. Because this is a biological and not a mathematical problem, you can't just 'work it out', there are too many factors. Too little food, too much insulin, a growth spurt, a change in the weather, illness, stress - any of these can upset the balance.

Katie is keen that Samuel should be encouraged to be independent and unashamed of his condition. She does leave him in supervised play areas, though never for more than an hour and she carries a mobile 'phone. Birthday parties and swimming lessons are only possible if mum or dad can stay with him.

"What's helped me most is the fact that I've got a lovely little boy who is full of life - it just makes you want to do the best for him," says Katie. "Samuel can run, he can skip, he can laugh. He's a happy child. But he does have a lot of restrictions. We are so very proud of the way he copes with this problem - the injections, the tests, the not having sweets or ice creams when others do."

"As a parent, sometimes all you can see is the diabetes and your life revolves around food. On the other hand, you learn not to worry about all the little things in life."

### Week of awareness

The week of 6 - 12 of June is National Diabetes Week and local support group SCWIDD (Swindon Children With Insulin Dependent Diabetes) is trying to raise awareness of children with diabetes.

SCWIDD offers children and their families support, information, and social opportunities, alleviating the isolation they can feel.

Newsletters, events and holidays help keep them in touch with each other and there is a help-line for moments of crisis.

Around 90 children in and around Swindon have the condition Insulin Dependent Diabetes Mellitus (Type 1 Diabetes). Nobody knows why the pancreas stops producing insulin, but, if not corrected, it can prove fatal. Sufferers need between 1 and 4 insulin injections a day.

Unfortunately, diabetes is increasing in young children. It is currently incurable. A child with diabetes will have to live with it for life.

For more information about SCWIDD, call Jan Hinder on 764124 or Tina Phillips on 336665.

## Fashions for the disabled and elderly

dressability is an innovative new service for people who are disabled and/or elderly and are finding clothes a problem

There are three ways in which the scheme can help: through clothing adaptation, with custom-made items and with up-to-date information.

Ordinary clothes can often be altered to make life easier. For someone who finds using their hands difficult, a smart shirt can become wearable again with some velcro and a little ingenuity. A regimental tie can be adapted to clip on easily.

Many disabled people end up in

what becomes a uniform of jogging clothes, unable to reclaim self-respect through what they wear.

"Ultimately, if you can't dress yourself, you stay in bed," says clothing advisor Sian Barry.

dressability's chairman, Tim Kilminster, *right*, is in a wheelchair as a result of MS. As a former personnel manager for the House of Fraser, he likes to be smart and stressed how important clothes can be to social inclusion. "I've a right to dress up like anybody else. My self-image has improved dramatically because of the clothes dressability has adapted for me. It's about dignity. I feel on equal terms with others around me."

Clothes can also be made to measure or in response to a specific difficulty. For example, people whose condition results in excessive salivation, dressability have come up with sweatshirts with button on absorbent fronts

that are so attractive that they appear to be a design statement. A similarly absorbent cravat might be an option.

For more information or to arrange a home visit, call Sian Barry on 01225 442646.

• Sponsors are needed to ensure dressability continues beyond its pilot phase. If you can help, call Sian Barry on the number above.



### Helping left handers

A new video has been released to help parents and teachers solve the special problems encountered by left-handed children.

It costs £13.95 plus £2 p&p and is available from 'Anything Left-Handed', 14 Norfolk Avenue, Christchurch, Dorset BH23 2SE. Tel: 01202 484013.

## Hot Plates: innovation in feeding the less well off

A West Swindon based charity, already attracting interest from as far afield as India and Zambia, is seeking funding to enable it to establish a national food voucher network.

Hot Plates was set up in 1994 by David Edgecumbe from Grange Park and Julian Kay, with support from their wives. "Our aim is to facilitate the work of local community organisations and churches in providing for those on a low income or in personal difficulty, through a growing national food voucher scheme," said Mr Edgecumbe, who now acts in a voluntary capacity as project manager.

"Because the vouchers are only valid for food and are non-transferable, the scheme offers a simple but effective way of ensuring that an individual or family receives a good, hot meal."

The charity grew out of the realisation that, despite Britain's relative affluence, there are still many who struggle to make ends meet. By working closely with organisa-

tions such as the West Swindon Family and Community Project, Homestart and The Filling Station, Hot Plates is able to distribute vouchers to the people who need them most. These include families on low incomes, the elderly struggling on meagre pensions, the homeless and people faced by sudden illness or other crises. An occasional treat of fish and chips for the family of a man fighting depression, or a meal voucher for someone struggling to come to terms with homelessness, can provide a lifeline.

Hot Plates vouchers are very secure and not easily abused. Each voucher is countersigned by the distributor, who also writes the recipient's name or national insurance number. When the voucher is cashed, this must be matched by identification.

For the scheme to work, Hot Plates spends considerable time developing good relationships with outlets prepared to take the vouchers. It is vital that they understand and accept that voucher holders may well be under extreme pressure and that some, because of their circumstances, may not be the cleanest of customers.

In West Swindon, Freshbrook Takeaway and The Trawlerman already participate, but new outlets are always needed.

In its first year, Hot Plates issued 468 £2 vouchers to people in West Swindon. This figure has risen to thousands, spreading throughout Swindon and to areas of London. It has so far been funded by grants from local businesses such as Burmah Castrol, Allied Dunbar, Reader's Digest and GWR, with support from the

Church and other community organisations. New funding is now needed to enable the scheme to grow towards its vision of a national network. Given the current overseas interest, it could also become the inspiration for similar projects worldwide.

If you can support Hot Plates, through funding or being an outlet for them, contact Project Manager David Edgecumbe on 881611 or Administrator Linda Emery on 525676.

[www.cablenet.net/~hotplates](http://www.cablenet.net/~hotplates)

### Vacancy

Due to the success of Hot Plates, the charity is looking for a part time administrator. Initially this is for 8 hours a week, but this is likely to increase as the work of charity develops. For details, call David Edgecumbe on 881611.

## Downing Street date for carer

After speaking out boldly about the plight of carers, Carole Rose, from Westlea, was invited to Downing Street on 29 April for a personal meeting with Treasury Minister Alistair Darling and Swindon South MP Julia Drown.

Carole found herself in the media spotlight earlier in the month when she spoke out at a national lobby of Parliament called to highlight fears about the effects of welfare benefit changes.

Government reforms mean that she, and millions of others like her, will be forced to prove whether they should be looking for work or remain eligible for benefits. Carers, the disabled, the sick, widows and those on low incomes will all be affected.



*Carole and Elena from last October's Link when we reported their pleasure at seeing Glen Campbell at the Wiltshire Festival*

Carole acted as spokesperson not just for Mencap, of which she is a member, but for a coalition of 500 disability organisations nationally including MIND, Age Concern, the RNIB and SCOPE.

Reading a prepared statement, she said, "a few weeks ago, the government claimed that carers were saving the country millions of pounds and that we needed res-

pite and backup services. The welfare reforms are a contradiction and, if the Gateway Interviews go ahead, I feel that this government doesn't trust me and that this government doesn't value the job I do."

As she prepared her severely disabled daughter, Elena, 21, for the journey to Westminster, Carole was filmed for TV and her story was also covered by BBC Wiltshire Sound and The Guardian. The glare of publicity followed two very difficult weeks during which Elena had been ill with a virus.

It's at times like these that Carole's resources are stretched to breaking point. Unable to express what is troubling her, Elena, whose difficulties include cerebral palsy and epilepsy, can become distressed. She will bang her head against walls, spit out food and drink, and have difficulty balancing. Any parent will remember how distressing such behaviour is in a small child. Elena is a fully-grown young woman.

That Carole went ahead with her speech despite this, is testament to how strongly she feels. "It was something I wanted to do personally," she said.

She is glad that she can now get back to her everyday routine of caring, though she feels the experience has taken a lot out of her. But that's often how life is for carers.

Hopefully, Carole's return to Westminster will have been less draining. She will not be taking Elena this time, nor will she be on public display. Although she is uncertain what the meeting will bring, she expects reassurances. What is certain is that she will not mince words about the realities of life for Britain's 6.8 million carers.

## It's great to have three

Last month we talked to Jan and Alan Cotterell from Abbey Meads about their first year with triplets. Here Gina Dennis talks to a family from Shaw with triplets who are getting ready to leave primary school.

Being a triplet is a real advantage - so say Katharine, Natasha and Oliver Thompson, 11-year-old triplets from Shaw.

"There's somebody to play with all the time," said Natasha. "You can ask questions if you get stuck on homework," added Oliver.

Starting at playgroup and then school was so much easier than for most children because they had each other. "They've never had to experience going to anything on their own," commented mum, Linda. Friends tend to be shared and all three are equally happy mixing with boys or girls.

Although Linda had been receiving fertility treatment, she was amazed when a scan showed she was six weeks pregnant with 1 ... 2 ... 3 babies (the doctor looked for a fourth). She had just spent the last few weeks heaving boxes around as she and husband Nigel prepared for a move from Newbury to Swindon. Now she was being instructed to 'take it easy' and having to plan for the triplets' arrival.

Natasha, Katharine and Oliver were born at PMH by emergency caesarean on the 20 December 1986, nearly two months early. Oliver, the heaviest at 4lb 6oz and Natasha

needed help breathing. Katharine, the lightest at 3lb 0oz, was the sturdiest and the only one of the three who Linda could hold initially.

On Christmas morning, each incubator sported a stocking from which tiny teddies peeped out.

"We were brilliantly looked after," said Linda.

having enough time to give individual attention. The nappies were 'horrendous'. It was a logistical nightmare taking three babies out.

Despite this, the family had a holiday in Bournemouth when the children were 9 months old. And at 18 months, Linda left Nigel hard

much notice - some won't believe that they are triplets. All three thought this would be different if they had been identical. They are now anticipating the move to Bradon Forest School in the Autumn and an increasing 'separateness'.

All the children are keen on sport, enjoying football, netball, gym, dancing, swimming and rollerblading. Natasha plays the clarinet and Katharine the recorder, whilst Oliver gained second place in a recent art competition.

However, says Linda, "all three have very different personalities and requirements." Katharine appears timid and quiet at first, is slow to get up and untidy, but will do anything for anyone.

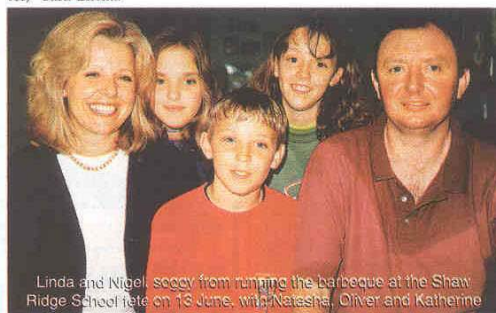
Natasha is finicky about food, but tidier and more assertive than her sister.

Oliver explored the world with enthusiasm and was the first to walk but is very laid back; he was described as 'a bit of a chauvinist' who likes to get his sisters to do things for him: Katharine does, Natasha won't.

Linda would be the first to acknowledge the initial difficulties of life with triplets. She relied heavily on support from her family at the pre-school stage. It can also be expensive - three of everything and no hand-me-downs.

But she says, "I don't think there was ever a time when we felt 'this is all too much.' You reap your rewards after the first three years."

Now, although she knows it sounds gushing, she feels she and Nigel gained "the perfect, ready-made family."



Linda and Nigel, seen from running the barbeque at the Shaw Ridge School fete on 13 June, with Natasha, Oliver and Katharine

Looking back, the early stages were tough. "You have to write off the first three years in terms of yourself." Linda managed to breast feed for six months, expressing milk so others could share the seemingly endless process. She felt continually guilty about not

at work and took off with the triplets to stay with friends in Italy.

As often happens with the best laid plans, a bureaucratic breakdown saw Linda without help on arrival at Milan airport. She remembers vividly having to trail up and down the aircraft stairways for each child in turn. Oliver, the strongest at this stage, 'helped' push his sisters in their buggy across the tarmac.

When the threesome started school, Linda felt a huge sense of loss. But the children themselves settled easily and have never found it a problem being triplets. Occasionally a teacher refers to them as the 'Troublesome Trio.'

Mostly, their peers don't take

## Focus on Mental Health

### Labelled a 'loony'

A group of women who have had mental health problems meet each week in West Swindon. Gina Dennis joined them to find out what it is like to be diagnosed as 'mentally ill'.

Mental illness, it seems, is still something that 'happens to other people'; it carries a stigma which marks you as a social outcast and everything else about you is discredited.

The women in the group admitted that, prior to their own illness, they would probably have rejected others who were mentally ill.

Social perceptions and media im-

ages tend to polarise 'sanity' and 'madness'; people are either 'normal' or 'mad enough to be locked up'. There is little understanding that mental illness, like physical illness, can strike anyone and, whilst traumatic and debilitating, is not necessarily this extreme.

When first diagnosed, there is a lot of fear about how family and friends will react. Sadly, some really 'don't want to know'.

Because of the stigma, both the sufferer and their family will try to hide the real nature of the illness, inventing physical ills as a cover. But, at the same time, "you imagine there's a label across your forehead saying 'loony'." This sense of shame also makes it hard to ask for information.

And information is vital. Carers are rarely told anything about the patient's diagnosis, leaving them unequipped to provide what is needed. The group felt strongly that people would get better sooner if their families were well-informed about their illness and helped to give the right support.

For most of the group, such information has not been made available even two or three years on.

For these women, coming to groups has often helped more than anything, "because people work out a way together." Talking and sharing is vital. It lets out 'an accumulation which has reached breaking point'. Often what one person says triggers a buried awareness for others. Openness and honesty are movingly obvious within the group. They wished that they had come together sooner.

Whilst professional support is appreciated, 'having the right person who understands what the real

issues are for you is crucial'. And, although the group acknowledged the huge pressures on the mental health services, delayed appointments can feel like the end of the world. Anne commented that sometimes you don't feel that professionals really understand what your experience is. Liz suggested, "a physical illness can be seen. Feelings can't. Instead of telling them what you really feel, sometimes you create an embroidered version."

Although people do recover from mental illness, the stigma remains. It is more acceptable to show a period in prison than to admit to mental health problems on job applications. But the group felt strongly that, if a doctor considers you fit to work, there should not be an issue. Indeed, you may well be a stronger, more understanding person.

"Although it was a terrible experience, it's done me good having a breakdown," said Liz. "It's slowed me down to a more realistic pace."

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### TWIGS grow stronger after a year

In November last year, Swindon's horticultural therapy project, TWIGS, was established at Moredon Gardens in Cheney Manor, to help people rebuild their lives through gardening and craft activities.



TWIGS members in the greenhouse, from left, Robert Wills, project coordinator Alison Duxberry, Ray Muir, Tim Warfield with a bumper crop of tomatoes

The voluntary organisation provides leisure and rehabilitation opportunities for people who are experiencing emotional distress or mental ill health. As well as being fun, gardening and working with your hands are very therapeutic. Much enjoyment and satisfaction can be gained by choosing from a range of activities: sowing seeds, tending trees, growing flowers, or weeding, to woodwork and decorating plant containers.

Volunteers and people who have been referred work alongside each other on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10am to 4pm. As one volunteer said, "there's more to

TWIGS than digging - there's a great community spirit here - everyone is treated as a person not an illness."

TWIGS can always use new volunteers, particularly anyone with indoor gardening or craft skills over the winter months.

If you would like to know more about TWIGS, to visit or would like to volunteer, telephone 523294.

### Open Day

Sat. 5 December 10am - 3.30pm  
Jubilee Gardens horticultural project, Church Bush Hall, Cricklade Road, Purton Stoke. For further information, call 771539.

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The first in an occasional series looking at needs in the community and the organisations which can help

### Mental Health Support

If you are concerned about your own or someone else's mental health, you should contact your GP. Information and support is also available from:

- Focus on Carers and Self Help, Morley Street, Swindon. Tel: 531133
- Hobbs Unit For Skills Development, Hobbs Unit, Hawthorn Centre, Cricklade Road, Swindon. Tel: 618627 ex 26. Vocational assessment/guidance and work skill training for adults with a disability or health restriction.
- Mondays Moving On. Contact Pam Pixton, Neighbourhood Worker, on 465462. Social and support group for women with mental health problems, who meet on Mondays at the Link Centre.
- Thamesdown Friendship Club, behind St Lukes Church, Broad Street, Swindon. Tel: 490876. Social club, support, advocacy
- Understanding Stress and Nervous Illness, 261 Ferndale Road, Swindon. Tel: 619735. Self-help group

More detailed information on many of these organisations is available at the Swindonlink web site, [www.swindonlink.com](http://www.swindonlink.com) under Voluntary Groups, Mental Health.

### Directory provides essential information

A new services directory for people with mental health problems is now available from Swindon & District Mind. It contains a wealth of information about who does what locally, from support groups to courses to housing and benefits.

MIND works with people who have been labelled or treated as having mental health problems. As well as a befriending scheme, MIND organises the following so-

cial opportunities:

- Tuesdays, 6.45 - 8.45pm: Drop in session at the Pilgrim Centre Cafe, top of Regent Street, Swindon
- Wednesdays, 10.30am - 12.30pm: Coffee morning at the MIND Office, 1 Regent Circus.

You can ring Swindon & District MIND on 432031 or 436889 for information, to make an appointment to talk to someone, or to order a copy of the directory.

### Stepping stone back to work

Swindon QUEST (Quest Employment Support Team) believes that, contrary to many people's perceptions, employers can be supportive to people who have been mentally ill.

QUEST helps people who are experiencing or recovering from mental health problems back to work. They offer training and individual support in finding and sustaining employment. As well as confidence building and job-seeking skills, support includes help with the social aspects of work like: 'what will I do at lunchtime?'

Project worker Anne Billingham says, "we find employers very supportive. We're rarely turned down for work tasters and placements, which are invaluable in assessing work readiness. These can lead to paid employment when there are appropriate job vacancies."

It is now illegal for an employer with more than 15 employees to turn someone down for a job on the grounds of past mental health problems.

To be supported by QUEST, you need to be referred by a social worker, CPN or possibly a GP. However, you can contact them for more information on 433571.

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